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Mondale faults Reagan as foreign policy leader

Democrat's focus is on foreign policy

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NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J. — In his most forceful attack on President Reagan's leadership and competence, Walter F. Mondale yesterday accused the president of being so remote from the formulation of foreign policy that he cannot be an effective leader.

"In four years, this administration has not achieved a single, significant foreign policy success," Mr. Mondale said in a speech here before a friendly crowd that was dominated by students from Rutgers University.

"I don't doubt that the president's for peace, but he has not mastered what he must know to command his own government and to lead," Mr. Mondale said. "When a president doesn't know what he must, he can't command."

In recent weeks, Mr. Mondale has been urged to attack Mr. Reagan's competence, especially by House Speaker Thomas P. (Tip) O'Neill, Jr. (D, Mass.). The speaker has described Mr. Reagan as the least knowledgeable president he has dealt with and has declared that Mr. Reagan works so little that it is "sinful."

Until yesterday, Mr. Mondale had focused on Mr. Reagan's record on foreign policy and arms control largely in terms of philosophical differences between the candidates, and by questioning Mr. Reagan's willingness to ease world tensions. But yesterday, Mr. Mondale shifted his tone, saying he did not question Mr. Reagan's motives but did challenge the president's abilities.

Mr. Reagan has long maintained that his leadership style is comparable to the board chairman of a corporation, a leader who does not immerse himself in detail but makes the final decision on an issue himself after hearing all sides.

Mr. Mondale argued yesterday that a president can't lead if he doesn't know "essential facts" and become "vigorously involved" in setting foreign policy and in seeking to control nuclear weapons.

"There is no reason to doubt Mr. Reagan's desire for peace; he dreams the same dreams that we do," Mr. Mondale said.

"But a president must master, command, learn and lead. You can dream to your heart's content, but if

you believe that nuclear missiles can be recalled after they're launched, as Mr. Reagan did, you won't lead us to a safer world."

Echoing a theme that his running mate, Geraldine A. Ferraro, has sounded for several weeks, Mr. Mondale outlined several misstatements by Mr. Reagan on nuclear weapons, and said: "When the fate of the Earth is at stake, good intentions are not enough — and good intentions are all that we have today."

Mr. Mondale said that the president's style of leadership "guarantees deadlock among his advisers; the forces of inertia inevitably prevail, those who oppose progress almost always win."

"When a president is not vigorously involved, things just don't happen — and they're not," Mr. Mondale said.

"In Central America, there are no talks. In the Middle East, there is no policy. In Lebanon, there is no protection. And on Earth, there is no arms control," Mr. Mondale said.

In taking his newly sharp approach to the question of presidential competence, Mr. Mondale was confronting the issue of "take charge" leadership — an issue on which polls have shown voters view Mr. Reagan favorably and have doubts about Mr. Mondale.

But Mr. Reagan's own responses to questions raised about security measures at the U.S. Embassy in Lebanon after a terrorist attack last month may have given Mr. Mondale an opening to attack the president on the leadership issue.

Mr. Mondale has noted in recent days the shifting explanations and comments of the president on the Lebanon security issue — from de-meaning the abilities of the Central Intelligence Agency, a view which was disputed even by Republicans and members of his administration, to the president's comparison of delays in installing security devices with the difficulties of remodeling a kitchen.

Yesterday's speech seemed to mark the emergence of a more openly aggressive campaign by Mr. Mondale, a move that began last week with a hard-hitting speech before a student audience in Washington.

Taking into account the state and musical interests of his audience, Mr. Mondale asserted that Mr. Reagan was even out of touch with Bruce Springsteen, the New Jersey-born rock musician whose song lyrics Mr. Reagan quoted in a recent appearance in the state.

"Bruce may have been born to run," Mr. Mondale said, referring to the singer's biggest hit song. "But he wasn't born yesterday." The singer, whose music often describes the plight of blue-collar workers and the unemployed, has expressed differences with the president's policies.